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Neutral Realism

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the problem of realism has often been viewed as an extension of the problem of the external world. At the same time, the assumption has often been made that realism is appropriate to some domains, while antirealism is appropriate to others. I here sketch a neutral realism that rejects both of these assumptions and thereby allows us to treat the realism debate independently of the debate over naturalism. The starting point of neutral realism is indeed neutral with respect to any metaphysical commitment to the existence of some single totality of objects or facts, or to any unified all-encompassing domain that might be identified with nature. The resulting view is shown to open up new prospects for the treatment of the actuality of ethical or aesthetic values as well as for the question of the metaphysical relationship between concrete and abstract entities.

There is a tendency for the realism debate to take as its starting point two sometimes unexpressed, but often also explicitly accepted, methodological assumptions, both of which are problematic and both of which will play an important role in what follows:

> Assumption (1): the problem of realism is to be viewed as an extension of the problem of the external world.
> Assumption (2): while some domains of discourse are oriented towards a realist norm of truth, for others there reigns an antirealist norm of truth.

The division of "the world" into domains, on this latter assumption, has an exclusively discursive nature––that is, it flows from the fact that there is a plurality of discourses. Thus the view is a type of *methodological* antirealism: it holds that without a plurality of discourses there would not have been any plurality of domains individuated by different norms of truth. Assumption (2) often goes hand in hand with the further assumption that, while there is only one domain that is realist in outlook, on the antirealist side there is a plurality of domains corresponding to an open or indefinite plurality of discourses with different norms of truth. On this construal, as far as I can see, it is assumed without further argument that the realist domain must be in

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any event homogeneous, and that only the antirealist domain might be further differentiated within itself by additional norms.[1]

The position of *neutral realism* that I will sketch here rejects both of these methodological assumptions. Specifically it denies that the realism debate is an extension of the debate over the external world, and it also denies that there is a plurality of domains if and only if there is a plurality of regions of discourse and thought. This allows a differentiation of the concept of realism from the concept of naturalism and thus allows us to treat the realism debate independently of the debate over naturalism. For the time being, neutral realism is therefore neutral with respect to any metaphysical commitment to the existence of some single totality of objects or facts, or to the world in the sense of a unified all-encompassing domain that might be identified with nature. This opens up prospects for a new realism that are genuinely non-naturalist in their methodological structure. This raises new prospects for the treatment of the actuality of ethical or aesthetic values as well as for the question of the metaphysical relationship between concrete and abstract entities.

In part I, I will develop a general argument for such a neutral realism. I call this *the argument from facticity*. I will then, in part II, argue for an *ontological pluralism*, thus arguing against the kind of monism which forms the foundation of the first of our two problematic assumptions above. First, though, I provide some further differentiating remarks on the weaknesses of both assumptions in order to make clearer what I am contrasting my position with.

Where the investigation into the range and meaning of realism begins with the belief that there is or should be an "external world" independent of "the mind," a wrong conclusion suggests itself, namely that the scope of realism is to be determined by the (metaphysical, epistemological, or ontological) particularities of this "external world." However, the specification of what is meant by "external world" in such contexts is not always clear, and is sometimes marked by complete incoherence.[2] There is also the tendency to treat moral or other values as well as norms and rules as being from the very start candidates for an antirealist treatment because the concept of the external world is generally burdened by a bias towards naturalism.[3] Thus the term "external world" is usually understood in such a way that it cannot easily encompass values and similar entities. If the existence of an external world is supposed to be the paradigm of what realism has to account for, then we thereby lose our commonsensical starting point for a realism about values, concepts, or mental states and processes. The realism debate arises because the objectivity of one or other kind of discourse seems to be threatened (by skeptical arguments, for example). But why should we accept a take on the realism debate that is premised on a view that makes it hard to see how facts, for example about our own mental lives and the mental lives of others, are as real as mountains, quarks, or the milky way?[4]

In line with this bias, the "external world" is often equated with the universe as a whole. As such, belonging to the universe is implicitly or explicitly bound to the idea of falling within the object domain of physics or of the ensemble of the natural sciences. "The external world," "nature," or "the universe" are then happily introduced as though no particular conceptual or theoretical decisions are required to understand what one means by these terms. However, we should be on our guard against

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the outsourcing of philosophical investigations to physics. The thesis that the physicists know what "nature" or "the universe" mean because of their particularly successful investigation of certain objects or domains of objects is largely unmotivated. In short, naturalism or physicalism cannot be accepted as articles of faith inherited from science.

Certainly physics exists as a subject, and we can assume further that some of its statements refer successfully to something that is real and not merely a theoretical entity or posit. But claims as to what physics refers to extend far beyond the singular physical results of research and take for granted that physics has a well-defined subject area whose propositions range over a maximally unified total domain: the universe or cosmos. The claim that physics is somehow unified *a priori*, that it is concerned with the subject area of nature or the universe, may be legitimate as an epistemological or methodological claim. However, this concession would not imply naturalism or physicalism, for one is still a long way from justifying the thesis that nature or rather, the universe, is ultimately either the one and only domain or the most fundamental object of enquiry that there is.[5]

Accordingly, it is a primary methodological stratagem of the neutral realist to avoid Assumption (1) by maintaining a healthy distance from unclarified concepts of the (external) world. It is not a necessary condition for realism about a subject matter that the fact and objects it deals with belong to the (external) world.

The realism presented here is neutral in the sense that it takes an approach to the realism debate that does not depend upon which objects and facts are held to exist or obtain. It therefore operates under counterfactual conditions. We choose this path because the most attractive meaningful candidate concept of the external world is arrived at by asking ourselves which objects and facts *would have existed or obtained* if no one had ever existed who could refer to these objects and facts. The very concept of the external world thereby results from a counterfactual consideration. It introduces counterfactual conditions by abstracting from the fact that there are epistemic subjects (in this case *us*) who did in fact acquire this concept. The external world is "external" at least in the sense that it would have very largely been the way it was, is, and will be had no one been around to notice any of this.

This, however, corresponds to a widespread but erroneous notion of epistemic objectivity according to which epistemic objectivity only exists where beliefs refer to something that itself is something other than a belief.[6] However, this immediately raises the following question: how, when we refer to the world along with the diverse conditions of reference (intentionality, consciousness, self-consciousness, and so on) can we be referring to something that is unified while at the same time have it be the case that at least certain external parts or features of this world would have existed even if we had never been there to refer to them?

To choose against this background the option of a "naturalization" of the mind is to accept a prior decision to the effect that the concept of the external world is to be taken as the standard of reality—where paradigmatic access to this world is claimed by sciences other than the humanities and social sciences. The proponent of naturalization then draws out of this epistemological concept a theory of an already extant universe that is already complete as it stands—with naturalized minds

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among its parts. Philosophy is then left with only the rational reconstruction of some conceptual leftovers. The metaphysical concept of the world in the sense of a maximally unrestrained totality is thereby surreptitiously transformed into the concept of the physical universe, or of nature. However, this identification requires an argument that is generally not offered when naturalism or physicalism are assumed to be the only acceptable requirement of a scientific worldview or a scientific method.[7]

At this point, it has become customary to introduce the neutralizing of the realist debate under the conditions of a methodological antirealism, which is our Assumption (2). This approach was initiated in the seminal work of Michael Dummett and Crispin Wright, although I leave it open as to whether even they also use something like the external world as traditionally conceived as anchor for reality.[8]

Assumption (2) is associated with the commonly accepted idea that *global* realism can be distinguished from *local* variations of realism—an idea which, at least for the time being, I accept. In addition, however—and this is a step that I will criticize—it is assumed that what one assigns a realist or antirealist description to is tied to the factual plurality of discourses. Truth is seen as a norm of discourse that can vary according to the type of discourse in question; the fact that there is a plurality of domains is then made dependent on the fact that there is a plurality of such discursive norms of truth. Metadisciplines such as metaethics, metaepistemology, metaontology or metametaphysics then arise with the task of determining whether given sets of expressions—about ethics, epistemology, existence, or the fundamental structure of reality—are or are not guided by suitable realist parameters. To what extent metadisciplines are called for or whether these ultimately converge with the concept of metaphilosophy is still unclear.[9] I believe, however, that this way of looking at the realism debate is premised on the notion that there is some unified and homogenous domain-in-itself: the world or reality as a whole, whose denizens we group into different domains individuated by corresponding discursive norms. This then raises the second-order question as to the integration of those norms and discourses into that world, a question often left unanswered.[10] The question is how we can think of the integration of these norms into the world. For instance, if we understand the world as the totality of what "is always already there anyway, regardless of the activities, if any, of knowing and acting subjects,"[11] it becomes hard to make sense of the integration of norms into the world thus conceived.

An often unarticulated monism underlies the traditional realism debate and its two assumptions—minimally a "formal assumption of the world (*formale Weltunterstellung*)" as Habermas, himself clearly a defender of Assumption (2), points out.[12] The appeal to the world or reality—whatever these might be—is considered an unproblematic and formally trivial background presupposition of any debate. However, I take just this metaphysical monism to be untenable for several reasons, which I have presented elsewhere.[13] For the matter at hand it is important to note only that the neutrality of the realism sketched in this paper undermines both substantial metaphysical monism and the metaphysically more modest "formal assumption of the world" version accepted by Habermas and others.

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I. THE ARGUMENT FROM FACTICITY

Neutral realism is first and foremost motivated by an argument that I call "the argument from facticity." This argument shows that some sort of realism is inevitable, but that there is no good reason to assume in advance which domains of objects require realist acceptance. The issue of realism is conceptually independent of the issue of whether certain types of discourse could be theoretically reduced to other types of discourse. The argument ultimately shows that every position at some point must meet realist requirements. I take this to be the common denominator of the rejection of overgeneralized constructivism in Paul Boghossian's *Fear of Knowledge*, Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, and Maurizio Ferraris's *Manifesto of New Realism*.[14]

The argument from facticity runs in exemplary form as follows: even if, for example, solipsism—thus the most extreme antirealism one could imagine—were true, realism would not thereby be refuted, because the truth of solipsism still leaves at least one absolute fact left over as residue.

We can see how the argument works in more detail as follows. Let us accept that we have reason to suspect that one of our epistemically relevant registries (for instance, our sensory equipment, ethical community, religion, consciousness, and so on) is subject to systematic error.[15] For example, our sensory equipment registers information. Famously, due to their dependence on variable animal sensory faculties, color concepts and color discourse tend to be treated as forming a domain for which some kind of antirealism seems to be required. Consequently, whoever thinks that a meadow is objectively green and that a tomato is objectively red falls victim to a systematic error because particular filters generate internal representations that occur with noticeable phenomenological regularities and about which correct statements can be made.

A similar consideration also applies to value judgments when one relativizes them to ethical communities. For instance, perhaps one thinks human rights are good for the sole reason that or merely because one is a Christian. On the basis of cases of this sort, it seems reasonable to suggest a relativist theory that maintains that something *appears* to be a certain way relative to a particular epistemically relevant registry, when in itself that something may *be* completely different.[16]

For the next step of the argument, let us now suppose that there were a generalizable suspicion applied to all such registries that could lead us to transcendental idealism or in the extreme case even to solipsism. In this case we might think that there would *be* nothing at all if there were no epistemically relevant registry. Maybe the logical form of colors as properties relative to subjective registries can be generalized to such an extent that—as Kant in fact thought—it applies also to space and time.[17] In that scenario, even if there were an inaccessible thing-in-itself, it would not play any role in bringing about any verifiable objectivity of our beliefs. Or perhaps belief in the existence of such an inaccessible thing-in-itself should prove itself to be reducible to a systematic error, resulting again in some form of solipsism. Or, taking Boghossian's line: how do we exclude that for all statements it is the case that they are true or false only because they produce or construct objects and facts on account of an already existing registry? If it is the case that our color registry is what makes statements about colors (or at least about color qualia) true or false, why is this not

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the case in general? Is there not for every statement a corresponding registry relative to which we must make the verifiability of the statement intelligible to ourselves?

Yet, we cannot subject the whole of our theorizing to systematic reservations merely because suspicions of systematic error are held to be warranted in specific cases unless we have additional justification for generalizing on the basis of the matter at hand. There will always be a limit to such a generalization due to the fact that we cannot have systematic reservations about any form of theorizing unless we take it to be the case that there is some discourse for which we need to acknowledge at least a potential divergence between our conditions of taking something to be true and truth itself.

And now let us return once more to the extreme example of solipsism, which is an instance of global constructivism in Boghossian's sense. For the solipsist all objects and facts exist precisely because someone (the solipsist himself) refers to them. It is simply not the case that everyone takes solipsism to be true. We (the nonsolipsists) have a different starting point.

Convincing oneself of even so much as the truth-aptitude of solipsism via considerations stemming from the theory of truth, presupposes that solipsism can be held to be true or false. Thus, there must be some information on the basis of which the solipsist would come to the conclusion that solipsism is true after all. He must believe that he bases his view on some kind of evidence. On what ground could the solipsist believe that the information he registers in the form of systematic phenomenological regularities could occur merely as a result of his taking them to be true? According to its own standards, solipsism is itself an *absolute* fact; if true, it is a fact that is contrasted with the *constructed* facts that it considers to be true merely because they are constructed by the subject involved. Thus, solipsism according to the solipsist would have been a fact, even had no one ever held it to be true. Therefore, even if solipsism were true, there would still be some unconstructed and in this sense absolute fact. Hence, even in this most extreme antirealist scenario, some kind of realism is inevitable.

Let us call this conclusion of the argument from facticity the *principle of facticity*. This principle remains neutral with respect to more specific commitments as to what kinds of fact satisfy it, as it is derived via the idea that even if solipsism or something bordering on solipsism (say transcendental idealism, as understood by many a critic) were true, it would still have to hold.

Boghossian adds a particular twist to his version of the argument for his "objectivism about facts."[18] He adds that we are entitled to rely on a set of epistemic principles or rules of inference and in particular assume that Austin's famous "specimens of medium-sized dry goods"[19] are more or less the way they appear to us. We do not consider tables, apples, trees, people, or the Rhine to be elements of a dream, and we apply inferential operations to our statements about them, operations that we also do not consider to be dreamt. For instance, when we place three green and three red apples in the otherwise empty fridge, we assume that there are now six apples in total in the fridge. We typically see no reason to withhold judgment on such claims because it could be the case that life is a dream. Roughly, this is why our modern attitudes are unified into a system of natural assumptions regarding mesoscopic objects

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and rules of inference that allow us to access otherwise unobservable features of physical reality. Let us call this epistemic system the *modern epistemic system* (MES).

If we will sooner or later encounter absolute facts, why rule out in advance that we are already acquainted with them in modern scientific practices? For why should the facts that we observe *within* the MES only become facts after we successfully ascend one level in the order of justification just so that we may pin down facts *about* the MES itself? The principle of facticity points out, rather, that no possible ascension in the order of justification allows us to avoid the recognition of absolute facts. Thus, realism is unavoidable. Through this application of the principle of facticity we have acquired warrant for rejecting any move from the outset that will wind up with a general denial of absolute facts. In this way, we recognize that the principle of facticity gives us an *a priori* reason to hold on to certain fundamental principles from which we begin. According to Boghossian, the principle first directly supports a general "objectivism about facts"[20] and secondly at least indirectly supports the MES.

Nevertheless, the story cannot end here. It is striking that Boghossian extracts a somewhat neutral "basic worldly dough"[21] as a result of his application of the principle of facticity. Boghossian's concept of the MES is apparently designed to put him in the position of looking at the world under a given, warranted set of descriptions. In this way he can guarantee that the world dough is already accessible to us as an internally differentiated structure of facts and not just as any old content. If it is true that there is a MES, and we can at least imagine other, potentially conflicting, "alternative epistemic systems" (AESs), which cannot all have equal epistemic standing with the MES, then it seems to make sense to assign different statements to these systems, for example:

(MES1) The earth is about 4.5 billion years old.
(AES1) The earth is about 6000 years old.

Of course, Boghossian wants to be able to consider the fact expressed in (MES1) to be objectively true and the fact expressed in (AES1) to be objectively false. As he rightly recognizes, this requires that the world dough cannot be entirely undifferentiated.

The way Boghossian privileges the MES over other candidate AESs becomes clearer insofar as the MES, for him, is decidedly differentiated from creationist-style origin myths. Thus he refuses to grant these myths the same authority on the field of explanation as recourse to facts about natural events. The contrast between (MES1) and (AES1) leaves little room to relativize (MES1) to complicated constructivist theoretical superstructures. So far, so good. However, how are we supposed to deal with the following contrast:

(MES2) Spotted (and thus multicolored) giraffes sometimes stand on mountains.
(AES2) There are no giraffes, colors, or mountains.

One could argue for (AES2) on the basis of an extension of something held to be true within the MES, for instance, by arguing that modern humans must be ready to

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accept microfundamentalism, that is, the view that ultimately only subatomic particles are real and can be said to exist.[22] This creates a tension between our commonsensical commitment to the existence of giraffes on mountains and our commitment to certain methodological principles characteristic of the MES and its preference for scientific over religious explanations.

To the extent to which on the basis of the MES we can make a case against the existence of colored giraffes and mountains, there is a tension between Boghossian's commitment, against creationism, to the existence of mountains and giraffes prior to the existence of concept-using creatures and the fact that his own premises could contribute to undermining the belief in mountains and giraffes. The argument from facticity only establishes a ground for neutral realism and leaves it open which actual facts obtain.

In order to advance neutral realism, I would like first to highlight my commitment to a minimalist concept of a fact. By a *fact* I understand something that is true of something. It is true of me that I am currently sitting in front of my computer screen; it is true of Frankfurt that it is located east of Paris; it is true of 7 and 5 that they add up to 12; it is true of Faust that he falls in love with Gretchen, and so on. As such, I do not introduce the concept of a fact in order to give an account of the truth-aptness of assertions, thoughts or beliefs. Facts are not primarily truth-makers; they are themselves truths—as in conformity with everyday speech, where we often express ourselves in such a way that facts and truths are identified.[23]

In everyday speech we also use counterfactual alethic conditionals without a problem, as for instance in:

> (CAC1) Even if it had never occurred to anyone, it would still be true that the moon is a giant revolving rock.

or

> (CAC2) Even if no one had ever stated or believed anything, it would still be true that there are volcanoes.

The issue of realism depends on how we make sense of this sort of counterfactual conditional. What would have been the case if certain representational or epistemic systems had never existed? In this way, both of our two problematic assumptions of the realism debate can be avoided in favor of a more neutral stance. A general objectivism about facts need not be grounded in a metaphysical interpretation of the MES or in any other metaphysical conception regarding the ultimate nature of reality or its overall composition.

II. ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM

Let me lay down some more vocabulary. By *ontology* I understand the systematic investigation into the meaning of "existence," or rather, into existence itself. By *metaphysics*, in contrast, I understand a theory of absolutely everything (of "the world" or "reality," as is typically said). Accordingly, *metaphysical realism* is a view about

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absolutely everything, whereas *ontological realism* need not be committed to the existence of "the world" in the metaphysical sense of the term.

Ontological realism maintains that many things would also have existed even in the absence of creatures with concepts and that we have unproblematic access to that fact. *Ontological antirealism* results from considerations that undermine our capacity to grasp what existence is independently of the activities of concept-using creatures, as it maintains that there is no complete answer to the question of what existence is without mentioning conceptual preferences or relativizing the existence predicate to some conceptual scheme. On this spectrum, my contribution to the debate about New Realism is committed both to ontological realism and to *metametaphysical nihilism*, by which I refer to the view that there is no such thing as a domain comprising absolutely everything, which is why metaphysics does not have an object it might study.

By *ontological pluralism* I understand the view that there are different domains of objects. According to my preferred realist version of this view, it claims that some of these domains are maximally modally robust in that they would have existed even had no one ever conceptually, theoretically, or discursively delineated them. Not all domains of objects are domains of discourse and evidently no domain of objects would have been a domain of discourse had no creatures evolved capable of elaborating discourses. Yet, given the fundamental idea of neutral realism, this robustness is not tantamount to the fact that there are natural kinds or that nature is metaphysically carved up into different domains (into animate and inanimate matter, say). In my view, what distinguishes one domain from others is typically that there are objective identity criteria that characterize objects as belonging to the domain regardless of whether or not we fully grasp what these criteria are. Note that this does not rule out that we are able to grasp these criteria. With reference to Frege, I call the identity criteria responsible for domain-membership "senses" and, in order to steer clear of the extensionalist view that domains of objects are just sets of all the objects belonging to the domain, my most general term for a domain of objects is "field of sense."[24]

One can introduce the fundamental motivation of ontological pluralism, as I understand it, through a modified version of Hilary Putnam's idea of conceptual relativity. I call the following the *allegory of the cubes*. Suppose that three cubes lie on a table: a blue, a red, and a white cube. Now we ask an unbiased passer-by how many objects there are on the table—which normally should trigger "3" as the right response. A physicist with metaphysical tendencies might on the other hand give an estimation of the elementary particles that "lie on the table," and in doing so also give the correct response "N," where N is considerably larger than 3. A creative response could be "1," where the cube array is viewed as a singular artwork, for example, an ironic allusion to the films by Kieslowski. And so on. Let a "sense" here refer to the description under which 3, N, and 1 turn out to be true answers to the question concerning *how many objects there are on the table*.

Putnam himself describes similar examples as evidence for his "conceptual relativity" and he wants his examples to count as evidence against metaphysical realism in his sense.[25] His thesis of conceptual relativity is based on the familiar observation (harking back at least as far as Frege) that correct answers to the question of the

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number of objects can invoke a heterogeneous variety of meanings of "object." What is considered an "object" depends upon conceptual preferences. As soon as these are ascertained, there is objective truth, that is, right answers to the question concerning the number of objects there are on the table. Since Putnam does not deviate from the claim that existence can be understood by means of the existential quantifier, he concludes that there can be no ontology that transcends given conceptual preferences. The answer to the *how-many-objects* question in the cube scenario relies upon what counts as an object. In *Ethics without Ontology* he extrapolates from this an ontological claim:

> How can the question whether something *exists* be a matter of *convention*? The answer, I suggest, is this: what logicians call "the existential quantifier," the symbol "$(\exists x)$," and its ordinary language counterparts, the expressions "there are," "there exist" and "there exists a," "some," etc., *do not have a single absolutely precise use but a whole family of uses.*[26]

Putnam's own diagnosis of the upshot of cases like the cube case, thus, is committed to a form of ontological antirealism. In the passage just quoted he clearly suggests that the plurality of senses of "existence" somehow is "a matter of *convention*." Yet, the claim that in the allegory of the cubes there are many objectively true answers to the question how many objects there are, need not be associated with any form of antirealism.

According to Putnam, the plurality of correct answers to the *how-many-objects* question in the cube case is created by the plurality of uses of the existential quantifier. Thus the starting point of his antirealism invokes our ability to describe situations differently. However, the question is: under what conditions is the plurality of descriptions really objective? In other words, under what conditions can we assume that existence is truly said in manifold ways? Here I diverge from Putnam. Why not say that there really are N objects under the description of the physicist and there really is one object under the description of the artist? The ontological realist maintains that all three get it right. This is why ontological realism is a form of neutral realism. It does not commit to any version of the idea that there is a fundamental structure of reality, a structure reference to which would put anyone in the position to privilege one of the manifold senses under which objects manifest themselves to true thought.

Accordingly, I suggest that we account differently for the allegory of the cubes. In the first place I want to give up the metaphysical requirement that there must be a reality that we describe in various ways and that in itself has to be unified. The simplest reason speaking against this requirement is that our descriptions of this reality are themselves *ex hypothesi* also real, just like that which they describe. That something exists, which we can describe in different ways, should not mislead us into mistakenly thinking that there is a domain of objects whose identity criteria might differ from those we capture by describing them as objectively being thus and so. If our goal is to make sense of a plurality of true descriptions, we are not made better off by postulating an indescribable metaphysical reality appearing in manifold ways to different observers. There are a number of reasons which speak against the idea that

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there is a unified world broken up into manifold ways of appearing by the presence of concept-using creatures in that very world.

First, the concept of the world as absolutely everything is threatened by incoherence, as is shown in the arguments advanced by Kant, Cantor, and their contemporary followers such as Patrick Grim (1991), Graham Priest (2002), and Guido Kreis (forthcoming).

Second, even if the assumption of totality were appropriate, objects appearing to true thought as being thus and so (objects under different descriptions) would also have to belong to the domain of "absolutely everything."[27] If the world is absolutely everything, any talk of plural ways of access by the mind to mind-independent reality therefore adds structures to the world itself. Therefore, any account of the world itself will have to mention the fact that there are objects in different domains distinguished from each other by the fact that they contain objects under different descriptions. If this is the case, under what description could all objects coexist in the one purportedly all-encompassing domain (the world)?

Third, the order of explanation setting out from the assumption that different descriptions might describe the same overall domain of objects relies on a distorted conception of the requirement for realism, namely on the conception (underlying our Assumption [1]) to the effect that the realism debate has to start out from the problem of the external world. We cannot introduce the world as the solid guiding principle of the realism debate as long as we have not secured any substantial understanding of what we mean by "the world" and how it could be a domain of objects.

But what about cases which generally inform our overall sense of reality and existence? Should there not be quasi-a priori verdicts on what there is that inform a more substantial account of the world? Consider the following assertion:

(E_1) There are no unicorns.

We hazard that most readers would be inclined at first glance to agree with this statement. But of course there must be unicorns in some sense, for example in the film *The Last Unicorn* or in the book *Unicorns are Jerks*. That there is exactly one unicorn mentioned in *The Last Unicorn* and many unicorns in *Unicorns are Jerks* is not true because there is one reality that we describe in many ways. The three sentences,

(E_1) There are no unicorns.
(E_2) There is exactly one unicorn.
(E_3) There are several unicorns that all behave rather badly.

are all true, although not because they describe reality in different ways, but because they are true about different fields of sense. For instance, (E_1) is true about planet earth, (E_2) about *The Last Unicorn*, and (E_3) about *Unicorns are Jerks*. Neutral realism in combination with ontological realism claims that it is sufficient for something to exist that it appears in any old domain. There is no need for the metaphysical assumption that there is an all-encompassing domain, an assumption which also leads to the question in what sense such a domain could itself possibly be said to exist.[28]

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Similarly to the unicorn case,

(E_4) Faust is a fictional object.

and

(E_5) Faust really exists.

are not incompatible, as fiction and reality do not contrast simply because there is a singular all-inclusive domain called "reality" to which Faust either belongs or does not belong. The literary constellation is moreover itself ontologically much more complex, given that Faust was also a historical person, also someone steeped in legend, in addition to being the literary character who falls in love with Gretchen. In the same way *Death in Venice* is really about Venice and Munich and not merely about an imaginary or fictional Venice and Munich. Fiction is not generally about a domain metaphysically separated from the world in the metaphysical sense of "absolutely everything."

In a similar vein, Kripke insightfully points out that there are not only "fictional objects" but also "fictional fictional objects."[29] In his discussion of the problem he nevertheless winds up accepting that there has to be both a restrained and an unrestrained—"out and out"—concept of existence. However, Faust's existence is just as restrained or unrestrained as any other existence, even if it is true that the play *Faust* would never have existed had literary imagination not been part of its causal pedigree.

This is not just a lesson to be drawn for the ontology of fictional objects. On the same ontological construal, I understand the sentence,

(E_6) There is exactly one natural number between 3 and 5.

as an assertion about a domain, namely the domain of natural numbers. Analogously this is also the case for:

(E_7) The Federal Republic of Germany exists.

It exists, for example, in the European Union, or in the domain of modern democracies. When one applies this form of ontological pluralism to the allegory of the cubes, one can say that there are three cubes in the domain of cubes and N elementary particles in the domain of a particular spatiotemporal region. The temptation to look for a unified basis of reduction for all of these expressions and to reduce, for example, the cubes and the artwork to some corresponding spatiotemporal region, immediately violates the accepted existence of those various descriptions. Carnap expresses his earlier commitment to metaphysical realism in the *Aufbau* in the form of the claim that there is "only one domain of objects and therefore only one science."[30] Yet, such a commitment is not necessary for a neutral realist view. How would considerations underpinning the realism debate at all motivate substantial metaphysical

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claims such as the claim that philology, sociology, political science, and maybe also geology, biology, or chemistry are not all sciences with objectively true commitments? All of this speaks against the requirement that we can only put forward an *ontological* realism if we commit ourselves to a more substantial *metaphysical* realism and is, therefore, part of the case against the identification of ontology and metaphysics.

The weaknesses of metaphysical realism, as I have pointed out so far, do not imply the need for an antirealist therapy, as there is room for a defense of a realism that is both ontologically realist and ontologically pluralist. It might be useful to clarify my position by considering briefly the kind of ontological pluralism recently discussed by Kristopher McDaniel and Jason Turner.[31] The position they refer to as "ontological pluralism" is only roughly worked out, since their focus is on the meta-ontological justification of the coherence of the very idea that there might be "ways of being."[32] Their discussion of the viability of such a position remains within the framework of metaphysics. Ontology, for them, is tied to the search for the fundamental structure of reality, and in their view disagreement in ontology turns on the meaning and function of existential quantification on the level of the fundamental structure. Turner defines ontological pluralism as the view that "*the true fundamental theory uses multiple existential quantifiers.*"[33] This evidently presupposes that there has to be a true fundamental theory, which is what I deny. Accordingly, I reject the idea that we only need to figure out how much plurality is required by a truth-apt use of the existential quantifier in order to save ontological monism.

McDaniel and Turner approach a domain ontology in the sense of ontological pluralism that is used in this paper—which is to say they hold that for something to exist is for it to belong to a domain. Existence thereby concerns domains and not the specification of predicates of things or objects within a domain. Turner comes close to this kind of domain ontology:

> Quantifiers give us a realm of things, and predicates let us divide that realm. Quantifiers come first: only after we have our domain of things, provided by our quantifiers, can we start dividing them up with our predicates. (2010, 30)

Neutral realism is not committed to the widespread methodological assumption that we understand existence better or even completely by inspecting the use of the existential quantifier in relevant discourses.[34] I take it that the actual order of explanation should be the inverse: in order to understand how assertions that contain "∃" concern *existence*, one needs access to the meaning of "existence" independently of an already established formal system.

Despite the differences between McDaniel's and Turner's brands of ontological pluralism and the one presented here, our diverging uses of the term are not merely homonymous. This is because their ontological pluralism is in my vocabulary an ontological pluralism wedded to metaphysical realism, and metaphysical realism is something which I reject. The difference between their ontological pluralism and the view defended here is that I argue for ontological pluralism without metaphysics and hence also without metaphysical realism.

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The defended view, therefore, is a neutral realism that is neutral also in that it considers metaphysics to be an empty subject; at the very least one need not favor a particular metaphysical position in order to be an ontological realist, both pluralist and neutral, in the sense put forward in this paper.[35]

NOTES

1. Compare Wright (1992), and on the underlying debate Pedersen and Wright, eds. (2013), in particular Wright (2013).
2. See Gabriel (2009).
3. For a similar take on this point see Wright (1992, ch. 5).
4. See Moran (2001, 2.1).
5. Compare also Jonathan Schaffer's distinction between "world-only" and "world-first" monism. He himself argues for the latter in Schaffer (2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2013). In my own terminology, I distinguish between *ontic* and *metaphysical monism*, which by and large correspond to Schaffer's dichotomy. For more on this, see Gabriel (2015).
6. See in addition Searle (1992), Nagel (1989), Moore (1997), Gabriel (2014c).
7. See also the illuminating reconstruction of Kant's transition from the concept of the world as an absolute totality to a cosmological concept of the world (to a "universe" in my vocabulary) in Kreis (2015).
8. See Dummett (1978; 1981; 1991) and Wright (1992; 2013). In his (1973) Dummett argues that "there can be no such thing as the domain of all objects" (533). On the discussion of the possibility of unrestricted universal quantification see Williamson (2003) and the papers in Rayo/Uzquiano (2006); also more recently Kreis (2015), particularly Chapter 12.3.
9. On this discussion see Williamson (2008).
10. Against this see Gabriel (2013).
11. Brandom (2002, 208). This is Brandom's formulation of what Williams (1978) and following him Moore (1997) have labeled "the absolute conception of reality."
12. See for example his (2003).
13. Gabriel (2013; 2014b; 2014c; 2015).
14. See Ferraris (2004), Boghossian (2006), my epilogue to the German edition of Boghossian (2013), and also Meillassoux (2008).
15. I here speak of "registries" in order to avoid the second assumption from the start.
16. Ferraris speaks of the "transcendental fallacy," the confusion between ontology (what there is) and epistemology (what we know about what there is); Boghossian speaks of "constructivism" and "relativism." Meillassoux calls such a position "correlationism," though he draws other conclusions from his presentation—for a discussion see Gabriel (2015).
17. See Allais (2007).
18. Boghossian (2006, 22).
19. Cf. Austin (1962, 8).
20. Boghossian (2006, 22).
21. Ibid. 35.
22. There are, of course, also good arguments against it. A good overview of metaphysical arguments and physical evidence against it can be found in Falkenburg (2007).
23. A contrary view is held by the proponents of what, in Gabriel (2014b), I call the "naïve ontology of individuals," who assume that there is a world that consists of individuals that are somehow so (spatiotemporally) arranged that certain statements are made true through their arrangements. "Fact" is then understood as "truth-maker," which immediately suggests that facts are not truths themselves, but rather *that in virtue of which truths are true*. Here, in contrast, I wish to remain closer to everyday speech.
24. For more details and a defense of this see Gabriel (2015). My understanding of the ontological significance of Frege's concept of "sense (*Sinn*)" in this context is similar to Mark Johnston's account in Johnston (2007; 2009, ch. 10). However, it is not clear to me whether Johnston is also committed to a full-fledged ontological realism, let alone ontological pluralism about the "realm of sense," as he ties it to his concept of "Objective Mind—the totality of objective modes of presentation" (Ibid., 154). Thanks to Arata Hamawaki for making me aware of the similarity between Johnston's account of the realm of sense and my notion of fields of sense.

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25. See also Putnam (2004, 33–70).
26. Putnam (2004, 37).
27. Gabriel (2013). See also Schrödinger (1989, ch. 3).
28. For arguments against the very existence of the world in the metaphysical sense of the term see again Gabriel (2015).
29. Kripke (2013, 60 remark 3, 73, 78, 81).
30. Carnap (2005, 9).
31. McDaniel (2009; 2010a; 2010b; forthcoming); Turner (2010; 2011). See on this discussion also Caplan (2011).
32. Turner (2010, 5): "According to *ontological pluralism*, there are different ways, kinds, or modes of being." This is not a trivial remark, as it presents pluralism as a claim not about the plurality of domains, but of ways, kinds, or modes of being, which is one way of being an ontological pluralist among many. However, I do not hold that there are ways, kind, or modes of being, but rather that there are domains of objects (fields of sense) and that this is why there are different senses of "existence."
33. Ibid., 9.
34. A paradigmatic defender of this in contemporary ontology is Peter van Inwagen. See van Inwagen (2014).
35. The first draft of this paper was based on a translation from the German by Abby Rutherford and Gregory Scott Moss. The very different German version "Neutraler Realismus" (Gabriel 2014) became the lead article for a discussion section of a volume of the *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*.

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